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JUSTIN MARTYR ON THE PERSON OF CHRIST

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Justin's idea of the person of Christ is well stated in the words which he puts on the lips of Trypho in the *Dialogue*.¹ The words are these: "When you say that this Christ existed as God before the ages, then that he submitted to be born and to become man, yet that he is not man of men, this appears to me not only paradoxical but also foolish." Whether this doctrine is "paradoxical and foolish" is not now our concern, but to see clearly what Justin believed. He sums up his doctrine for us in these points: (a) that Christ existed as God before the ages, or, as he says elsewhere, "before the morning star and the moon;"² and (b) that the Christ who existed as God became incarnate in a supernatural manner—the Word became man, but not "man of men."

Justin held that this Christ who existed as God before the morning star "came forth from the Father,"³ or was "begotten by him;"⁴ yet not as though the essence of the Father were divided (*ὡς ἀπομεριζομένης τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς οὐσίας*),⁵ but as one fire comes forth from another, leaving the original one undiminished. He came forth like "the host of the other good angels," from whom he differed in that he was the first-born; the only-begotten Son of God.⁶ This Christ, when he existed as God, appeared in the shape of fire and in the likeness of an angel to Moses.⁷ He appeared to Abraham and Laban and Jacob, to Joshua and other Old Testament saints and heroes.⁸ This first begotten Word of God, which is even God,⁹ became man according to the will of the Father, being born of a virgin of David's line.¹⁰

Such, in brief, was the faith of Justin, and the defense of this

¹ *Dialogue with Trypho*, 48, Otto's edition.

² *Ibid.*, 45.

³ *First Apology*, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵ *Dialogue*, 128.

⁶ *Apology*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸ *Dialogue*, 76, 78, etc.

⁹ *Apology*, 63 (*θεὸς ὑπάρχει*).

¹⁰ *Dialogue*, 45.

faith constitutes the vital part of his extant writings. Though a philosopher, Justin thought that he found this faith in the books of the prophets.¹¹ He proved it all from the Scriptures, and indeed from Scriptures which appeared to him to teach it so plainly that he said they "need not be expounded, but only listened to."¹² He does, however, give not a little exposition, as well as cite many passages of the Bible without comment, and we will now follow him as he vindicates, from the Old Testament, his faith regarding the person of Jesus.

Justin claims that Christ appeared in Old Testament times and that certain parts of the Old Testament refer to him. This claim is evidently of vital importance, and yet it is presented much as though it were a Christian axiom. Speaking of Moses, he says: "Our Christ conversed with him under the appearance of fire from a bush, and said, 'Put off thy shoes, and draw nigh and hear.'"¹³ He does not offer any proof of the assertion, or betray any consciousness of a need of proof. We shall see later how this view arose, and how he sought to justify it.

Justin's method of appropriating Old Testament Scripture to Christ is seen where he seeks to prove that Christ is called "God" and "Lord of hosts."¹⁴ He cites Ps. 24, and then adds:

When our Christ rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, the rulers in heaven, under appointment of God, are commanded to open the gates of heaven, that he who is king of glory may enter in, and having ascended, may sit on the right hand of the Father until he make the enemies his footstool. For when the rulers of heaven saw him of uncomely and dishonored appearance, and inglorious, not recognizing him, they inquired, Who is this king of glory? And the Holy Spirit, either from the person of his Father or from his own person, answers them, "The Lord of hosts, he is this king of glory." For every one will confess that not one of those who presided over the gates of the temple at Jerusalem would venture to say concerning Solomon, though he was so glorious a king, or concerning the ark of testimony, "Who is this king of glory?"

Thus the argument of Justin runs on this wise: The passage could not refer to Solomon and to an event in terrestrial history; therefore it must refer to Christ, and to him at the time of his entrance into heaven. This argument needs no other refutation than to be

¹¹ *Apology*, 32.

¹² *Dialogue*, 55.

¹³ *Apology*, 62.

¹⁴ *Dialogue*, 36.

clearly stated. What Justin declared could not be referred to Solomon is now universally referred either to him or to some other earthly king.

Other psalms are referred to Christ without any attempt to justify the act; as Ps. 46, beginning, "God went up with a shout;" Ps. 98, which speaks of Jehovah as revealing himself to Israel in the pillar of cloud; and Ps. 45. This sweeping and direct reference of Old Testament Scripture to Christ accords with that theory of inspiration which is laid down in the *First Apology*.¹⁵ "The utterances of the prophets," says Justin, "are not spoken by the inspired ones themselves, but by the Divine Word who moves them Sometimes he speaks as from the person of God the Lord and Father of all; sometimes as from the person of Christ; sometimes as from the person of the people answering the Lord or his Father." Thus the words of the Old Testament were truly spoken by Christ, he being the real author back of the human authors. At one time he impersonated the Father, at another the people of Israel, and again he spoke of himself. The human authors were an "instrument like a harp or lyre" on which the divine *plectrum* descended.¹⁶ Thus we see that Justin's use of the Old Testament, assigning some parts to Christ and others to the Father, was bound up with a particular theory of the origin of Scripture, and we may safely say that this theory proceeded from Justin, the philosopher, rather than from any sympathetic study of the Old Testament itself.

These Old Testament passages, which Justin thus claims for Christ, speak of "God," "Jehovah," and "the Lord of hosts," and accordingly he concludes that these designations are given to Christ by the Divine Spirit. It is indeed evident that if the passages refer to Christ at all, they refer to him under the name "God," or "Jehovah," or "the Lord of hosts;" for the name "Christ" does not occur in them.

Now, finding Christ referred to in the Old Testament as God, Justin proceeds to show that this God is distinct from the Father. To this point he devotes considerable attention in *The Dialogue with Trypho*. His first and chief proof is in the story of God's appearance to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre.¹⁷ He identifies one of the three

¹⁵ *Apology*, 36.

¹⁷ *Dialogue*, 56, 57.

¹⁶ *Hortatory Address to the Greeks*, 8.

angels with God, and does it on this wise. The words of the Lord, "At the set time I will return unto thee, when the season cometh round, and Sarah shall have a son" (Gen. 18:14)—words that evidently have their fulfilment in the birth of the promised child—are referred by Justin to an event subsequent, not only to the birth of the child, but also to the time when he was weaned (Gen. 21:8). That event was the word of God to Abraham when he was grieved by Sarah's demand that he should put away his son, Ishmael, with Hagar, his mother. Now, since this passage is regarded as the fulfilment of the word at Mamre, and since the speaker here is God, therefore, according to Justin, it is proven that one of the three who appeared to Abraham was God. But the angel's word to Abraham, "I will certainly return unto thee when the season cometh round; and lo, Sarah, thy wife, shall have a son," obviously finds its fulfilment in the birth of Isaac. It has nothing to do with the message to Abraham at the time of Ishmael's rejection. It may be noticed, in conclusion on this point, that, according to modern scholars, Jehovah was equally manifest in each one of the three angels.

Again, in the passage, "Jehovah rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from Jehovah out of heaven" (Gen. 19:24), Justin sees a numerical distinction between the God who appeared to Abraham and the Father.¹⁸ But to find such a distinction here, to speak of a Jehovah upon earth distinct from the Jehovah above, is manifestly to make the Old Testament contradict itself on one of its fundamental teachings. For the very name "Jehovah" is a monumental proof that the Jewish people thought of their covenant God as one (Ex. 3:14). There is no necessity of seeing in the passage anything out of accord with the strict monotheism of the Old Testament. The repetition of the name "Jehovah" may simply give emphasis to the thought that the awful judgment came from him; or, possibly, the word "Jehovah," in the first instance, is used of the angels who represented him. It is easy to explain it in harmony with the Old Testament.

Justin follows this proof from the history of Abraham with several other passages to show that the Old Testament knows a God who is distinguished from the Father. He quotes without comment the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56: θεὸς ἕτερος . . . ἀριθμῶ λέγω ἀλλὰ οὐ γινώμη.

first verse of Ps. 110: "The Lord said unto my Lord," and vss. 6 and 7 of Ps. 45: "Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever. . . . Therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee."¹⁹ The first of these, which reads, according to the Hebrew, "Jehovah saith to my Lord," gives no support to the point to be proved, for the one to whom Jehovah speaks is an earthly ruler; and the second, in like manner, cannot be relied upon, for in the very passage in which the messianic king is supposed to be called "God" he is compared with his "fellows," so that, if we have one God here, we have several, and the text would prove too much. If, then, the messianic king of the psalm is called "God," which is by no means certain, the term is evidently employed rhetorically, as in Ps. 82, where rulers are called "gods."

Justin further adduces several passages in which the speaker is called "the angel of God" and then speaks as *God*, such as the account of Jacob's wrestling and the narrative concerning Moses at the burning bush.²⁰ Now, if these passages really identified "the angel of God" with God, there would seem to be some ground for Justin's view; but it is quite certain that this identification is never made. When one who is called "the angel of Jehovah" speaks and says, "I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," it is now understood that he claims to *represent* God, and speaks in his name. As representing God and making known his will to men, the angel of the Lord, or the prince of Jehovah's host, or the prophets, may consistently be identified with God, for they speak with divine authority. But to identify the "angel" or the "prince" with God as respects *being* would be as foreign to the Hebrew mind as to identify the prophets with him. For the prophets' language concerning their relation to God is quite as favorable to Justin's interpretation as is that of those passages which speak of the angel of the Lord. Thus, e. g., the author of Isa. chap. 61, says: "The spirit of the Lord Jehovah is upon me, because Jehovah hath anointed me to preach good tidings to the meek;" and then a little later, with no indication of a change of speakers, he continues: "For I, Jehovah, love justice; I hate robbery." We see here an identification of the prophet with Jehovah in the matter of authority, and nothing more than this can legitimately be claimed when an angel of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

the Lord or the prince of his host communicates his will in the first person. The remaining texts which Justin cites in proof of his statement that the Old Testament knows a God who is distinguished from the Father are the famous passage in Prov. 8:22-36, and the two passages in Genesis where God is represented as speaking in the plural number (1:26; 3:22).²¹ But the passage in Proverbs is in praise of wisdom, and the author nowhere intimates that his readers may substitute the name of Christ for wisdom. To do this is to disregard the principles of safe interpretation, and thus to open the door to every sort of abuse of Scripture. Of the passages in Genesis—"Let *us* make man in our image," "Man is become as one of *us*, to know good and evil"—Justin says that they are proof of the association of at least two persons, and then he infers that the second person was Christ. The inference is not unnatural for one who approaches the Old Testament with a firm faith that "Christ existed as God before the morning star and the moon," but manifestly the inference is not necessary to the interpretation of the passage. We know of no biblical writer who understood the passages in this manner. And even if it be granted that the language of Genesis suggests at least two persons, it does not follow that, in the thought of the author, the second of these persons is Christ.

Before leaving this part of Justin's argument, it is fitting that we should notice with what conception of God he came to the discussion of such passages as these in Genesis. The philosopher's mantle, which he continued to wear after his conversion, is here very apparent. In his remarks on the angel that appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush, after Trypho has admitted that God was present on that occasion with the angel, Justin says that this God cannot have been the creator of all things, for "he who has but the smallest intelligence will not venture to assert that the Maker and Father of all things, having left all supercelestial matters, was visible on a little portion of the earth."²² And again we see clearly how his explanation of certain Scriptures was determined beforehand when he says to Trypho that, whenever we have such sayings as these, "God went up from Abraham," "The Lord spake to Moses," "The Lord came down to behold the tower which the sons of men had

²¹ *Ibid.*, *Dialogue*, 61, 62.

²² *Dialogue*, 60.

built," "God shut Noah into the ark," we must not imagine that the unbegotten God himself came down or went up from any place.²³

For the ineffable Father and Lord of all neither has come to any place, nor walks, nor rises up, but remains in his own place wherever that is, quick to behold and quick to hear, having neither eyes nor ears, but being of indescribable might; and he sees all things and knows all things, and none of us escapes his observation; and he is not moved or confined to a spot in the whole world, for he existed before the world was made. How then could he talk with anyone, or be seen by anyone, or appear on the smallest portion of the earth?

Since, then, the Old Testament speaks of God as having intercourse with men, and since in Justin's thought "the ineffable Father and Lord of all" cannot have such intercourse, therefore the Old Testament knows of a God who is distinct from the Maker of all, and this must be Christ. It is quite evident that this is not exegesis, but philosophy.

There remains one point in Justin's view of the person of Christ which we are now to consider—viz., that the Son of God, who is God numerically distinct from the Father of all, "submitted to become incarnate and to be born of a virgin of the family of David."²⁴ Justin finds in Gen. 49:11 a proof that "Christ is not man of men, begotten in the ordinary course of humanity."²⁵ The whole verse from which Justin quotes, taken from the prophecy of Jacob concerning his son Judah, reads as follows:

Binding his foal unto the vine,
And his ass's colt unto the choice vine;
He hath washed his garments in wine,
And his vesture in the blood of grapes.

These last lines signify, according to Justin, that

Christ would wash those who believe in him with his own blood. For the Holy Spirit called those who receive remission of sins through him, his *garments*; among whom he is always present in power, but will be manifestly present at his second coming. That the Scripture mentions the blood of the grape has been evidently designed, because Christ derives blood, not from the seed of man, but from the power of God. For as God, and not man, has produced the blood of the vine, so also has (one) predicted that the blood of Christ would be, not of the seed of man, but of the power of God.

Here Justin takes for granted that the words spoken of Judah

²³ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

concerned Christ, also that the "garments" of Judah are a symbol of those who believe in Christ, and that "the blood of grapes" is an inspired allusion to the blood of Christ. It is this last clause that contains the vital point of the argument; for as the blood of grapes is not produced by man, but by God, so Christ derives his blood from the power of God; that is to say, his birth was supernatural. This exegesis does credit to Justin's fancy rather than to his knowledge of Scripture. To readers of the present day it is not necessary to point out its weakness.

The next two proof-texts of Justin, as they do not give the sense of the Hebrew, but follow the incorrect rendering of the Greek translation, are naturally without weight. The passages as he cited them read thus: "Who shall declare his generation, for his life is taken away from the earth" (Is. 53:8); and, "I have begotten thee from the womb before the morning star" (Ps. 110:3). According to the American Revision the first reads, "And as for his generation, who among them considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living?" and the second,

Out of the womb of the morning
Thou hast the dew of thy youth.

Justin sometimes finds support for his doctrine in the most unexpected places. Thus in the first verses of Ps. 19, which speaks of the sun's daily journey across the sky, he finds it declared that Christ "would come forth from the highest heavens, and again return to the same places, in order that you may recognize him as God coming forth from above, and man living among men."²⁶ Here Justin follows neither the original Hebrew nor the Greek translation, but imports into the text a thought quite foreign to it. Where the Hebrew, speaking of the apparent movement of the sun, says:

His going forth is from the end of the heaven,
And his circuit unto the ends of it,

Justin gives the following version:

From the highest heaven is his going forth,
And he returns to the highest heaven.

After one has discovered this meaning in the psalm, it is only neces-

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

sary to assume that the poet was talking of Christ rather than of the sun, and one has an admirable proof-text!

Equally interesting is Justin's explanation of Isa. 8:4, which gives the reason why the prophet should call his son Maher-shalal-hash-baz.²⁷ The verse reads: "For before the child shall have knowledge to cry 'My father' and 'My mother,' the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be carried away before the king of Assyria." This child, according to Justin, was Christ, and hence the passage is thought to support his doctrine of the incarnation. The fulfilment of the prophecy is found in the visit of the magi to the infant Jesus. These magi came from Arabia, and Damascus is in Arabia. The riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria refer to "the power of the evil demon that dwelt in Damascus." The king of Assyria is Herod, so called "on account of his ungodly and sinful character." When therefore the magi came and worshiped the infant Jesus, in that hour "the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria" were "carried away before the king of Assyria."

Unfortunately for this interpretation, there is no proof that the magi came from Arabia, or that there was a particular evil demon residing in Damascus, or that the magi had ever been subject to a demon either in Damascus or elsewhere, or that the riches of Damascus and spoil of Samaria could mean the power of a demon in Damascus, or that Herod might be spoken of as the king of Assyria!

There are yet three passages which Justin regards as proof of his view. The first is Isa. 7:14, spoken to Ahaz: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel." Justin appropriates this, making the following brief comment in justification: "It is evident to all that in the race of Abraham according to the flesh no one has been born of a virgin, or is said to have been born, save this our Christ."²⁸ In another connection²⁹ he says that the birth of the child would not have been a "sign," had it been natural. But at present this statement would be regarded as having no weight. Scripture does not confine the name "sign" to phenomena of a supernatural character (see, e. g., Luke 2:14). Then it is necessary to Justin's argument that the Hebrew should certainly speak of a virgin,

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

but scholars are still divided on the meaning of the word which Justin took in that sense (see, e. g., the margin of the American Revision); and surely on an uncertain text of Scripture we cannot safely build a doctrine. Further, it is equally necessary to Justin's argument that the conception spoken of in Isaiah should clearly belong to the future, but the Hebrew leaves this also in doubt. It is possible to hold that the prophet had in mind a present reality, viz., that the child contemplated had *already* been conceived, and manifestly in this case the verse does not lend so ready support to Justin's view. Then there is another obvious obstacle in the way of Justin's use of the verse. The prophet gave a sign to Ahaz, but the birth of a child hundreds of years after the death of Ahaz would surely not have been a sign to him. If then the passage speaks of a sign which Ahaz was to receive, the language can be referred to the birth of Jesus only as foreshadowing it, and so does not discriminate the character of his birth from that birth which was to be in the lifetime of Ahaz. It is possible that the prophet had the Messiah in mind, but, if so, he thought of his coming as an event of the immediate future.

From the Book of Daniel two passages are cited by Justin, each with brief comment.³⁰ In the night visions the seer saw "one like unto a son of man" (Dan. 7:13). This shows, according to Justin, that Christ "appeared, and was man, but not of human seed." This teaching he finds of course in the word "like." It is assumed that the prophet in saying "*like* unto a son of man" implied that the one he saw was really *different* from the sons of men, and then Justin defines this difference as an essential difference in origin. But in this he plainly goes quite too far. If the language in Daniel implies a difference, it certainly does not suggest the *nature* of that difference.

The other word of Daniel, and the last proof-text cited in support of the doctrine that God is represented in the Old Testament as becoming incarnate of a virgin, is that Nebuchadnezzar in a vision saw "a stone cut out of the mountain *without hands*." This teaches, in a "mystery," the supernatural origin of Jesus, for the expression "cut out without hands" signified that it is not a work of man, "but of the will of the Father and God of all things, who brought him

³⁰ *Dialogue*, 76.

forth." But here one must appeal from Justin to Daniel himself, who interprets the king's dream, and leaves no room for a reference to Jesus in the part concerning the stone cut out of the mountain without hands. "In the days of those kings," he says, "shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall the sovereignty thereof be left to another people; but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms and it shall stand forever." Thus the stone that smote the image, and which itself became a great mountain, was a *kingdom* set up by the God of heaven. There is no reference whatever to the Messiah. The contrast between this victorious kingdom of the future and the kingdoms of iron, clay, brass, silver, and gold, consists in the fact that the victorious kingdom is *from God*. It is this divine origin which is set forth in a figure in the "stone cut out of the mountain *without hands*."

We have now considered the Scripture support which Justin adduces for his doctrine that "Christ existed as God before the ages, then, that he submitted to be born and to become man, yet that he is not man of men." We will not say with Trypho that this appears paradoxical and foolish, but we can confidently say that it is not established by the Old Testament passages to which Justin makes his appeal. His Scripture argument is without historical basis. His propositions are not germane to any section of the Old Testament, and are made to appear so only by a kind of exegesis which has been as completely exploded as has the ancient theory of astronomy.

But this is not all of Justin's belief; it is simply a part of the theological aspect of it. He loved and worshiped the Jesus of the gospels, and found the sweetest rest in the diligent practice of his words.³¹ Occasionally we have statements regarding Jesus which are based on his own experience and observation, as when he says that, if all nations are blessed in Jesus, then is he indeed the Christ;³² and again when he says that he has been conquered by the divine instruction and power of the Word.³³ We have the ring of an unimpeachable argument that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world, when Justin cries out "O trumpet of peace to the soul that is at

³¹ *Dialogue*, 8.

³³ *Discourse to the Greeks*, 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 121.

war! O weapon that putteth to flight terrible passions! The Word exercises an influence that does not make poets, it does not equip philosophers nor skilled orators, but it makes mortals immortal." Here, on the plane of Christian life, Justin stands forth a worthy example of the faith, and one could wish that his thought had followed this vital line, instead of seeking by an artificial exegesis to establish propositions regarding Christ which lie beyond the range of experience. Of the facts which can be tested by life he had little to say, to judge from his extant writings; and even when he mentions these, as in the examples given above, he makes no use of them to confirm his views regarding the person of Christ. On the contrary, he goes to the Old Testament, and by preference to its oldest parts, and fixes on passages to prove his doctrine which, with the establishment of scientific principles of interpretation, are found to be irrelevant, obscure, or inconclusive.